Practices

# Taking Leave

Deborah Kapchan

**Taking Leave**

**Practices**

A series edited by Margret Grebowicz

*Fly-Fishing* by Christopher Schaberg
*Juggling* by Stewart Lawrence Sinclair
*Raving* by McKenzie Wark
*Riding* by Pardis Mahdavi
*Running* by Lindsey A. Freeman
*Taking Leave* by Deborah Kapchan
*Tomorrowing* by Terry Bisson

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

# Taking Leave

Deborah Kapchan

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
*Durham and London*
2025

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Liz Smith
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Untitled Serif and General Sans
by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Kapchan, Deborah A. (Deborah Anne), author.
Title: Taking leave / Deborah Kapchan.
Other titles: Practices.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Series: Practices | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025004919 (print)
LCCN 2025004920 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478032823 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478029366 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478061588 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Kapchan, Deborah A. (Deborah Anne) | Kapchan, Deborah A. (Deborah Anne)—Religion. | Muslim converts—United States—Biography. | Sufi meditations. | affect theory | LCGFT: Autobiographies.
Classification: LCC BP170.5 .K373 2025 (print) | LCC BP170.5 (ebook) | DDC 297.8/14092 [B]—dc23/eng/20250515
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025004919
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025004920

Cover text handwritten by Deborah Kapchan.

*for those in my life*
*who have taken their leave,*
*and yet remain . . .*

CONTENTS

## A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

In deference to the orthographic practices of the religions I discuss here, I drop the /o/ from the word G-d, and follow the Prophet Muhammad's name with /pbuh/ — "peace be upon him."

# PROLOGUE

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.

**—Matthew 4:18–20**, King James

*IHVH-Adonaï dit à Abrâm:*
*"Va vers* toi*, de ta terre, de ton enfantement, de la maison de ton père, vers la terre que je te ferai voir."*

YHWH-Adonai said to Abram:
"Go towards *you*, from your land, from your birth, from your father's house, towards the land that I will show you."

**—Genesis 12:1**, Chouraqui translation, emphasis mine

I am sitting on a bench in a cemetery outside the Huguenot Memorial Church where I've just spent an hour with other ten-year-olds around a small Formica table, blue, green, red, and yellow pencils scattered before us, the odor of graphite, wood shavings, and Elmer's glue in the air. I'd been coloring in the outlines of a robed man motioning to some fishermen getting ready to set out to sea. The words "Follow me" were on the top of the white page, but the ones that reverberated the most were those that came after, "And they straightway left their nets." They took their leave.

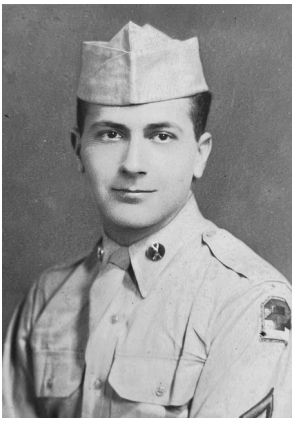
I'm too young to understand the symbolism of those nets—the nets of ambition, of compulsion to work, to have a family, the nets of addiction, and other nets that entrap humans in suffering—but I know even then that I don't want to be caught in those snares. Rather I want the peace I experience when breathing in the moist soil and old stone of this cemetery. Is it the spirit of some long-dead saint buried there that is communicating with me?

I sit in that charnel ground, waiting for my father—not G-d, but the one of flesh and blood, the person I call my "real father" when I am with my friends, the one that picks me up every weekend from the garden apartment in New Rochelle where I live with my mother and her new husband.

My father Marvin would drive down the Pelham Parkway in his Ford station wagon on his one day off a week, a Jew from the Bronx traveling to the suburbs to pick up his daughter and take her back to 196th Street. Sometimes, after a lunch of fried chicken and potatoes with my immigrant grandfather, my grandmother in her slippers at the stove, my father took me to the zoo. We'd linger in the fusty elephant house, where

I'd put a quarter in the crank machine, receiving a handful of brown pellets in my palm to hold under their wet hairy trunks. Sometimes we'd take a drive to Old Bethpage to visit the cousins, stopping for hot bagels and splitting one on the spot. In an old sepia photograph my father wears a cashmere coat and a Stetson hat on a city street. He listened to jazz and read Lao-Tzu, or so he tells me later. What he doesn't tell me is that he was once drafted to fight in the Korean War and came back early, a pacifist with a junk habit. He would beat it, with the help of his Hungarian mother, Stella, and subsequently accede to her wishes: taking over the family business and becoming a kosher butcher. Not a glamorous job, but he'd compensate for the long hours, the sawdust floors, the bloodied aprons, and the lingering smell of tallow by pursuing my mother, a pretty blonde dancer from New England, and a goya.

My mother turns down a job as a Rockette to marry my father, and that soon becomes her biggest regret. When she goes back to work two years after I am born, it is at the Arthur Murray Dance Studios on Fordham Road in the Bronx. It is 1960. She wears four-inch heels and teases up her blonde hair, teaching cha-cha, foxtrot, waltz, and jitterbug to lonely men in baggy suits who want to lure women like her into their lives. But one man in particular draws her attention. Thomas Venute is the studio's manager, a tall, handsome con man straight out of an Arthur Miller novel. She will soon see the third-degree burns that cover most of his torso and left arm, the result of playing with matches in his pajamas as a child. (The priest came to the hospital five times to give him last rites, but little Tommy refused to die, going on to wear long-sleeve shirts for the rest of his life, even on the hottest days of summer.) He drinks martinis

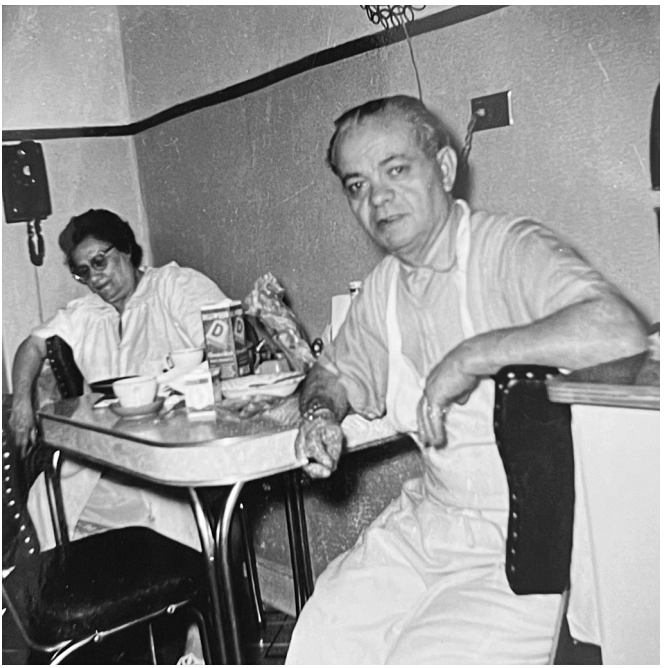


1 Nancy at age nineteen in her audition photograph for the Rockettes. (Photo: Author's Family Archives)

2 Marvin before going to Korea. (Photo: Author's Family Archives)

that I will learn to make for him ("just a liiiiitle bit of vermouth, Debbie doll"), and he gambles compulsively. He is, however, a great dancer. In a very short time, my mother divorces my father, and we all go on to live, if not the American dream, then an American drama.

My mother's leave-taking when I am just a baby suits my Jewish grandmother just fine. She never wanted her only son to marry a shiksa in the first place. Even if my mother *has* done the mikvah and converted to Judaism just to please her, she remains a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant in my grandmother's eyes; it is her birthright. Judaism is not. Stella paid for my mother's plane ticket to Tijuana, where she got a quick divorce.



3 Stella and Nat, the author's grandparents, at the Formica table in the kitchen of their Bronx apartment. (Photo: Author's Family Archives)

This information is necessary at the get-go, as all leave-taking is a leaving *from*. And all leaving, including my own, is motivated. But not all people *take* their leave. Leave-taking is an act of volition, a deliberate possession of one's own departure, a conscious abstention from what is often called fate. It contains a paradox, as the etymology of *leave* is, in fact, "to

remain." From the Old English *læfan* (to allow to remain in the same state or condition), taking leave is also a staying in place, a pause in time and space that allows something else to emerge. To take one's leave is to find home in a perpetually moving "residence on earth," to invoke Pablo Neruda. *Va vers toi et quitter la maison de ton père*. . . . Go toward your *self* and leave the house of your father. Or fathers in my case.

That Sunday in the cemetery is an aberration in our routine, as my father's usual day off is Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. That he is picking me up after church means that he is not working at the butcher shop as usual. It is a Jewish holiday. Maybe Sukkot. He is late, but perhaps my Sunday school has let out early. I sit there on the cold stone bench, not thinking, but being, breathing. And somehow I know. I know that our time on earth is about stories, and that humans create them, and that writing one consciously is what matters, that the details are fairly arbitrary except that they are one's own. I know also that what will always give those stories impetus is in that very charnel ground. It is the presence of death. I do not find that morbid. It's not physical death I am sensing at the time, but the death before death that, I later learn, is a theme in all human myths, particularly the ones I'll go on to explore—those I inherited and those of my soon-to-be adopted homes in Morocco and France.